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ABSTRACT

The use of evaluation findings for program improvement and decision making was explored with the philosophy that different levels of information use occur--from altering perceptions of a program, to influencing major decisions about it. The strategy of deliberately involving potential information users such as clients, sponsors, and other audiences in an evaluation study was employed. A brief discussion is presented on the viability of user participation as an evaluation strategy, with special attention to its potential for increasing the use of evaluation information. A number of program changes are outlined that resulted from an increased use of evaluation information by the program staff. An analysis is presented of why the program staff, in this instance, were very receptive to the information generated by the evaluation study, and why they used it so readily to revise the program. (JD)

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FINDING THE EVALUATION PHILOSOPHER'S STONE, OR HOW AN EVALUATION STUDY IS ACTUALLY HELPING PROGRAM IMPROVEMENT

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FINDING THE EVALUATION PHILOSOPHER'S STONE, OR HOW AN EVALUATION STUDY IS ACTUALLY HELPING PROGRAM IMPROVEMENT

The use of evaluation findings for program improvement has been a theme in evaluation literature for nearly 20 years. In contrast to their early expectations that evaluation studies would provide a significant portion of the knowledge base that policy makers would consider when undertaking important decisions about a program, evaluators have adopted a more realistic view of how much evaluation, in fact, is used and how it is used in decision making. They now see that many factors other than formal inquiry (for example, practical and political considerations, human biases, or common sense knowledge) often strongly influence the directions that programs take (Kennedy, 1984; Lindblom & Cohen, 1979; Weiss, 1980). Evaluators also now recognize that "use" can be a relative concept and that different levels of information use occur -- from altering perceptions of a program, to influencing major decisions about it (Alkin, Daillak, & White, 1979). And they have identified several strategies for enhancing knowledge use, one of which is to deliberately involve potential information users such as clients, sponsors, and other audiences in evaluation studies (for example, Gold, 1983; Stake, 1975).

In this paper we shall take a closer look at the information use issue as we describe how one evaluation study, employing user participation, has enhanced knowledge utilization and, in fact, has influenced program decisions. We begin with a brief discussion of the viability of user participation as an evaluation strategy with special attention to its potential for increasing the use of evaluation information. We illustrate this discussion with a description of our own evaluation study and our

experiences involving program staff in it. We then outline a number of program changes that we feel resulted from an increased use of evaluation information by program staff. Finally, in an analysis of this situation, we seek to answer the questions: "Why were program staff so receptive to the information generated by the evaluation study?" and "Why did they use it so readily to revise the programs?"

Knowledge Use in Evaluation

As Ernest House noted, "Producing data is one thing: getting it used is quite another" (1973, p. 133). This sentiment describes a major, chronic dilemma of evaluators. As far back as the middle '60s both Guba (1968) and Stufflebeam (1967) noted that evaluation information is often seen as useless and irrelevant to decision makers. Since then knowledge use -- or non use -- has been documented quite diligently by evaluators and policy researchers (for example, Alkin, Daillak, & White, 1979; Deshpande & Zaltman, 1983; Fl[illegible]o, Behrman, & Goltz, 1979; Leviton, & Hughes, 1981; Weiss & Bucuvalas, 1980). This attention has improved our understanding of the problem of information non use, its causes, and how it might be overcome. One strategy that a number of authors suggest to increase knowledge use is to involve clients or others in evaluation activities.

In examining the impact of health evaluation research, Patton and his colleagues (Patton, Grimes, Guthrie, Brennan, French, & Blyth, 1975) discovered that evaluation information probably <u>does</u> get used by decision makers. They suggest, however, that it is only one of a number of pieces of information that influence decisions and it often competes with other considerations, which Patton and his colleagues label "political" and

"personal." These authors see the personal considerations as the most interesting for they seem to be more susceptible to evaluator influence. These personal considerations include general low commitment and lack of enthusiasm for using evaluation information and low regard for the evaluator or evaluation design.

In reviewing the research of Patton and his colleagues as well as many others, Leviton and Hughes (1981) describe clusters of variables associated with these personal considerations that they feel could enhance a client's use of information. These clusters are: relevance of the information for program concerns, effectiveness of communication, ease with which the clients process the information, credibility of the information, and a key actor's (client, manager, or developer) involvement and advocacy for using the information.

More recently, Kennedy (1984) and McLaughlin (1984) have zeroed in on similar considerations noting that potential users may reconceptualize, incorrectly interpret, or even disregard evaluation information if it is not expressed in their terms or linked to their experiences. Both authors also stress the importance of making potential users comfortable with evaluation information as well as the importance of making that information relevant.

Leviton and Hughes (1981) suggest that client involvement in research studies is an effective way to make users comfortable with evaluation information, while making it relevant for them, and thereby enhancing their use of the information. They argue that by involving clients in study activities, evaluators stand a better chance of relating research information to user experiences, needs, and concerns; of making sure the

information is communicated smoothly and efficiently; of helping users recognize its usefulness; of keeping their own and the evaluation's credibility high; and of gaining the advocacy and involvement of a key actor.

Client involvement in evaluation and policy research studies is not a unique idea. Two evaluation approaches, one described by Stake (1975) and one by Gold (1983), explicitly call for user involvement at several stages of the evaluation process. Stake's approach, which he labels "responsive" evaluation, calls for the evaluator to consult users and try to incorporate their interests and values into the study design. He also recommends that their reactions to report drafts be solicited and, whenever possible, they be consulted in the interim. Gold goes even farther in his "stakeholder" approach. According to him, the evaluator should adhere to user (stakeholder) preferences -- in effect, work for the stakeholders, who specify what kinds of information they want and in what form. Client participation also has been advocated by Ballard and James (1983) and Leitko and Peterson (1982). The former suggest several participation strategies including using advisory committees, circulating report drafts, interacting verbally and in writing, and disseminating research products. Leitko and Peterson go beyond Ballard and James by advocating that clients actually be involved in research decision making.

Given the findings and recommendations of these authors, it seems that involving potential users in evaluation activities might be an effective way to overcome some barriers to knowledge use. First, it might help clients understand research activities more fully than if they were not involved. Second, it might make them more aware of the relevance, credibility, and

value of the evaluation information -- particularly if they helped generate it. Third, it might improve their communication with evaluators. Fourth, it might cause them to become advocates of the evaluation process. Fifth, and most important, it might enable the clients to process the information more quickly and easily and use it more effectively in decision making.

We have had the opportunity to test some of these hypotheses and suggestions about client involvement in the course of our documentation and evaluation of two school improvement programs, School Effectiveness Training and the Secondary School Development Program. Both are cooperative efforts involving staff from Research for Better Schools, Inc. (RBS), from local and state teachers' associations, and from schools and school districts in Pennsylvania and New Jersey. The clients we have involved in our study of these programs are RBS staff who developed the programs and provide technical assistance to schools implementing them.

The SET/SSDP Programs

School Effectiveness Training (SET) and the Secondary School Development Program (SSDP) are designed to help urban school staff and administrators establish processes that will enable them to work collaboratively toward organizational improvement in their schools. The programs, which were developed by RBS and the New Jersey Education Association (NJEA), are based on the premise that schools can become more effective by making better use of their human resources, by opening up the decision-making process to all staff members, and by focusing their improvement efforts on a few critical areas at a time. The developers' goals for schools that embark upon the SET or SSDP processes include higher staff morale, improved

communication, better working relationships among teaching staff and between teachers and administrators, improved learning environments, and finally, increased academic achievement among students. Through these programs, schools form coordinating councils that include representatives of the teaching, administrative, and support staffs. These councils, similar to labor-management councils in private industry, work through task groups to identify priority areas for school improvement and to develop -- and later implement -- plans for addressing these areas.

Both programs include an evaluation component, staffed by RBS evaluators. The study's major mission is to provide information that RBS and the NJEA can use to improve the SET/SSDP programs and to explain the programs' operations to others. This paper focuses on the evaluation study's program improvement function which -- as will be seen -- has resulted in modifications to the programs that apply both as the programs are introduced in new sites and as adjustments in on-going sites.

The Evaluation Study

The evaluation study of SET and SSDP is designed to maximize its utility for program improvement. The design is guided by two general perspectives. The first emphasizes knowledge use. The evaluators recognize that lack of utilization is a pervasive problem in program evaluation. Furthermore, they believe that one criterion of an evaluation study's effectiveness is its utility. Unless study findings are used, they cannot contribute to program improvement. Two particular suggestions from the literature on utilization outlined earlier are incorporated into the study design. They are the reliance on qualitative methods of inquiry and

the involvement of program development and technical assistance staff in evaluation study activities.

The second design perspective is that of planned change. The SET and SSDP programs involve introducing changes in schools. The evaluators believe that by incorporating a planned change perspective the study will provide the most useful information for program improvement. Therefore, the study includes variables identified by previous researchers as influencing the process of developing and implementing new educational programs (for example, Corbett, Dawson, & Firestone, 1984; Fullan, 1982; Lehming & Kane, 1981).

The evaluation study of SET and SSDP is primarily a qualitative one. Data are collected through semi-structured interviewing and observation. Program and school staff are interviewed several times each year. In addition, evaluators observe program-related activities, which include orientation and training sessions, coordinating council meetings, discussions between RBS and district staff, inservice sessions, and RBS planning meetings. During each data collection activity, evaluators are guided by broad lists of questions or categories of information. Data are later recorded as field notes. Other evaluation methods include analysis of information from surveys, program and school documents (program materials, meeting minutes, and newsletters, for example), and school records (test scores, student and teacher attendance rates, and the like).

The program staff who are involved in the evaluation study are RBS employees who helped design the SET and SSDP programs and who continue to modify and refine them, who provide training for teachers and administrators, and who provide technical assistance to help smooth program implementation.

Some program staff are involved as direct participants in the study. During most of the evaluation study's three years, one or two program staff members have been assigned to it as active, direct participants. Initially, two field agents -- whose primary program roles were to help develop materials and provide technical assistance to school-level participants -- helped with data collection. They accompanied the evaluator to sites, interviewed teachers, and prepared written field notes. Later, another staff member (the senior author) became a full participant in the study, contributing to design, data collection, and feedback activities.

Beyond this direct participation, other program staff members (including the director) are involved less directly but nonetheless deliberately and extensively in the study. Most of this involvement is related to data analysis or feedback activities. These activities involve staff in the evaluation study in that they stimulate and encourage two-way communication and interaction between the evaluators and the staff members. The involvement techniques are:

> Debriefing sessions -- These are of two types: (1) After visiting a particular site, evaluators usually give informal feedback specific to the site visit to the staff members responsible for program operations in that site. (2) Evaluators ask staff members to describe events the evaluators do not attend as well as other personal or telephone contacts with sites.
>
> Joint site visits -- Program staff and evaluators often attend onsite program development sessions or other project meetings together and compare notes about what happened.
>
> Field notes -- Field notes, which are edited to protect informant anonymity, are sometimes shared and discussed with individual staff members.
>
> Informal interaction -- Evaluators and program staff sometimes exchange general information about sites during brief, spontaneous interactions (over lunch, for example) in their workplace.

Feedback meetings -- Evaluation findings relevant to all sites and their program implications are discussed during formal meetings convened specifically to present recent information. Findings also are discussed during routine staff or other meetings.

Written statements -- After completing a round of interviews or otherwise collecting data from all sites, evaluators sometimes prepare written memos presenting tentative findings.

Formal reports -- Formal evaluation reports are written annually and distributed to staff members in draft form.

Potential Risks

Although we have found these staff involvement strategies have many benefits for us as evaluators -- including increased use of study findings, as will be discussed later -- they also have potential risks. So far, in contrast to the benefits, the risks are relatively hypothetical. They are disadvantages which we think could have occurred but whose negative impacts are so slight thus far that we prefer to label them "risks."

One major risk is cooptation of evaluators or developers. For instance, evaluators may avoid threatening issues, equivocate negative reports, or generally be less than candid in order to protect their relationships with developer participants. Program development staff, on the other hand, may rely too heavily on information they feel they have helped generate -- for example, by accepting and acting on evaluators' analyses or recommendations without reviewing them critically. To a minor degree some cooptation of this sort may be occurring in this study, but our impression is that to date there have been no serious consequences.

Another related risk has to do with the integrity of the study. When evaluators emphasize collecting information that is useful to ongoing program operations, they may neglect background information (whose

immediate utility is not apparent) which could become important to understanding how a program evolves in a particular school. That has occurred some in this study, but we feel it has resulted as much from the lack of sufficient resources for the study as it has from the study's focus on utility. Furthermore, the evaluators are aware of the importance of background information and attempt to collect it at every opportunity. So, this has not been a serious problem -- although it remains to be seen if the program might have benefited had more comprehensive background information been collected sooner.

Another, more serious, risk to a study's integrity is that program development staff who participate actively may replace evaluation personnel. This may influence the nature and quality of evaluation activities. Program developers often have relatively little training in evaluation methods. Also, their status may be higher or lower than that of evaluation personnel they replaced. Consequently, technical aspects of evaluation activities may be deemphasized, tedious tasks -- such as those associated with compiling quantitative data -- may be eliminated, and the quality of data collection and analysis may suffer. To some extent, this study has been influenced by the level of evaluation expertise and the status of participating program development staff members. Quantitative activities have been neglected. Some field notes have been cryptic. A report draft contained statements that went beyond the data. For the most part, however, the evaluation study has proved sufficiently flexible to adapt to the type of assistance available, for instance by reducing the use of quantitative information. And so far, this direction has been

compatible with the staff's information needs. Also helping to minimize this risk is one direct participant's training in anthropology and consequent understanding of the goals and techniques of qualitative methods of inquiry.

Another risk of involving program staff in evaluation activities is the imposition that it makes on their time and priorities. In this instance, staff involvement in evaluation takes time away from their developing or assisting in the field tasks as they learn new skills or conduct evaluation activities. It also means wearing two hats and, in some cases, reconciling value conflicts -- whether to approach a situation as an evaluator or a developer or a field assistor. So far, no one has complained too loudly about these impositions. More extensive program staff involvement and the extra responsibilities it would bring with it would likely cause a change, however.

Benefits

The participation of program staff in the evaluation study has benefited the study itself, the program and its staff, and program clients at the district and school site level. One of the major benefits, the one which is the topic of this paper, has been an increase in the use of information generated from the study. Other benefits, which will be discussed first, are that costs have been reduced and that the study itself has been enriched.

It appears that evaluation study costs have been reduced because additional data are generated through staff participation without the expense of hiring extra evaluation personnel, although estimating precise savings is a complex task. There have been some costs associated with

direct participation -- in which program staff conduct evaluation activities such as interviewing teachers or observing meetings -- because other work has been displaced and the salaries of program staff are probably higher than those of staff who would otherwise be hired to assist with evaluation activities. Those costs seem to be offset by the program director's assignment of lower priority to the work that was displaced than to the evaluation study activities, and by the avoidance of the start-up, orientation and training costs of hiring someone new. Indirect participation has not required enough time of program development staff to displace other work, so it has expanded the data base at virtually no expense.

Staff participation has enriched the evaluation study for several reasons. First, of course, it has simply enlarged the data base. Second, characteristics of the people involved -- namely, the backgrounds and perspectives of the program staff members -- have enhanced their contributions to the study. Two of the direct participants have been involved in many previous, similar efforts to develop and implement new programs in schools. They understand the process of change and are quick to identify factors that facilitate or hinder program-related changes in individual sites. A third has helped develop program procedures and materials, is very familiar with both programs, and knows what questions to ask about them. The staff members who participate less directly also have varied perspectives -- in organizational development and adolescent development, for example -- and these perspectives have helped enrich the study. Third, the way in which the staff participation strategy is being enacted -- primarily its interactive quality -- has enriched the study. As

program staff and evaluators have discussed their observations, experiences, and reactions the portraits of the programs and of their operationalization in individual schools have become fuller and more complex.

Information Use and Program Changes

During the evaluation study's three years, we have observed program development and assistance staff introduce many modifications. Moreover we believe the evaluation study has influenced many of those changes, although its contribution cannot always be distinguished from that of other sources of influence. For example, the frequent informal interaction sometimes makes it difficult for staff to recall what information they obtained independently, from each other, or from the evaluators. Also, program and evaluation staff may both contribute information that allows them to piece together a description or interpretation of events in a site. And, many program changes have been made for multiple reasons, some that were related to the evaluation study and some that were not.

Despite these difficulties, we can point to several indications that the evaluation study has contributed to program improvement. First, some information that led to program changes was available only through the study. Other information that led to changes emerged as themes that recurred during formal and informal evaluation feedback. Finally, evaluators were sometimes present when program modifications were made or incorporated into onsite activities; we observed staff use evaluation information that had been communicated to them recently.

was the recognition that schools needed flexibility in identifying issues to be pursued through the program. Specifically, initial conceptual links to Edmonds' (1981) factors of school effectiveness proved to be too limiting to program implementation.

Operational Changes

These conceptual changes led to numerous operational changes. Field agents began to spend more time in sites, providing more follow-up assistance. They sought to ensure that their involvement would extend over a several-year period. They developed special materials to instruct school staff in program procedures and program-related skills. They held cross-site seminars where they provided additional technical assistance. They introduced annual intensive training sessions for coordinating councils. Developers also began to work more closely with administrators, consulting with them during the first program adoption sessions. They continued to elicit administrators' support and advised them to provide specific types of assistance such as time for planning and formal approval of council recommendations. In an attempt to introduce flexibility into the process of selecting issues, developers urged schools to establish sub-groups beyond ones determined by Edmonds' five factors, and, in fact, to move from standing "factor" groups to temporary "task" groups.

In sum, evaluation information helped cause program developers to modify their initial conceptualization of the programs along several lines. This, in turn, led to changes in the way program staff assisted site personnel and changes in the way the programs were carried out in the schools.

An Evaluation Philosopher's Stone?

Mythology tells us that alchemists once searched for a philosopher's stone: a mythical ingredient which, when combined with ordinary metal, caused the metal to turn to gold. Have we found the evaluation philosopher's stone? Have we found the mythical ingredient which causes program developers' ordinary knowledge to react with evaluation information to produce program improvements? To some extent, but some special circumstances and conditions came together for us:

- the nature of the evaluation study;
- the nature of the program's underlying philosophy; and
- the nature of the program development staff and how they approach their responsibilities.

The Evaluation Study

As we have pointed out above, we selected an evaluation strategy that involves program developers and assistors because we believe such involvement would make it more likely that the developers would relate to and use the evaluation information. Some program staff have participated directly in data collection and analysis. Others have been involved through extensive, interactive feedback activities. In our opinion, this approach has produced the desired results.

Program developers view evaluation information favorably and they consider it reliable often because they helped collect and analyze it. They use it to make decisions related to program revisions because it is presented to them quickly, informally, and in forms (memos, discussions, and conversations) that enable them to relate the evaluation findings to their experiences, responsibilities, and plans.

Involving program staff in data collection and analysis and communicating evaluation information to them quickly, informally, and continuously also has eliminated evaluation "surprises" to some extent. Program development staff rarely are shocked by written reports of implementation or other problems because they have been exposed to the data already -- and, in fact, perhaps because they helped develop the analysis -- and because the reports usually come quickly enough to allow developers to adjust the programs or their activities to prevent serious damage at a particular site.

Lastly, in choosing to involve development staff in evaluation activities we chose evaluation orientations and approaches to help make evaluation information "user friendly." For instance, when we decided to solicit program developers' input in our selection of categories of data, we did so to make sure they would feel comfortable that our information was related to their programmatic interests and priorities. Likewise, we selected a largely qualitative approach to data collection to help these developers feel more comfortable with the data than they would have with data generated quantitatively. Our decision to couple evaluation information with suggestions for possible courses of action also was chosen to make developers comfortable with the evaluation data and to make it easy for them to use. Even if our recommendations are not taken, we feel, including them will make it more likely that these developers will come to decisions about what to do than if only data were presented. Including all these considerations seems to have paid off in that program developers have used the evaluation information for the program decisions noted above. Moreover, the use of these provisions to make evaluation information easier

for developers to digest and use has helped us. It encourages developers to focus on a constructive activity -- considering alternatives for improvement -- rather than on a non-constructive one -- thinking up reasons why our evaluation data were wrong.

Program Philosophy

Both SET and SSDP have, as a philosophical cornerstone, the notion that the programs should reflect the needs of clients wherever possible. Of course this does not mean the programs are totally responsive; but, within theoretical boundaries, there is a considerable amount of content and process flexibility. This flexibility enables developers to tailor aspects of the programs to site needs and situations, even as these change over time. This, in turn, gives developers the flexibility to apply evaluation data quickly, as it is needed. And, they can apply it differently in different sites. Moreover, developers working directly with sites are allowed sufficient latitude to make site-specific changes in program content and process without having to clear them first. This flexibility and onsite discretionary power has often interacted with those attributes of the evaluation approach that made the information readily available and useable. Data -- perhaps collected or analyzed by a developer -- have been presented informally, its relevance for a particular site ascertained -- often rather quickly -- and modifications identified and carried out.

In addition to this philosophical emphasis on flexibility and responsiveness, there is a clear understanding among developers and evaluators that SET and SSDP are pilot programs -- for the time being, anyway. This understanding has further increased the latitude of program developers to

make process or content changes and has contributed to their willingness to use evaluation information to make those changes.

Program Development Staff

Unique staff attributes and attitudes toward their program responsibilities and roles have also contributed to their willingness to use evaluation information. As noted above, for example, developer responsibilities and roles are defined broadly and allow them considerable latitude for adjusting the programs to meet site needs. In addition to designing program content and processes, developers also serve as field agents -- introducing the programs and assisting site participants with implementation -- and, in some cases, as data collectors. In short, they are jacks-of-all-trades whose main responsibility is to make sure the programs work. This broad role definition has not only made developers comfortable with using evaluation information, it frequently causes them to seek it out in an effort to understand sites better. It has made them more likely to use evaluation information to modify the programs or their own activities. And, as noted above, the fact that the programs were considered pilot efforts made developers even more receptive to evaluation information and even more willing to use it.

Lastly, the program developers have a considerable amount of sophistication regarding evaluation and its value for improvement. Some have been evaluators and all have worked with evaluators on previous programs. Their backgrounds and experiences give them an understanding of evaluation. They are aware of its utility and are not reluctant to use it.

Conclusion

Although our strategy of actively involving program development staff in evaluation activities has been a kind of philosopher's stone, we think that we have benefited from a combination of circumstances also. The nature of the programs we are examining and of the program staff have helped the alchemy along. So in sum, we cannot call our strategy a panacea for the use of evaluation data dilemma.

We can say, however, that the involvement of program staff has been very beneficial. Beyond helping to get the information listened to, believed, and used, the strategy has reduced our costs, enriched our data base, and broadened our data's perspective. But perhaps most importantly, our efforts to involve program staff in evaluation activities has enabled evaluators and developers to come to a shared understanding about how educational change programs can be made more effective. So we -- and we think the program developers, too -- recommend that this strategy be considered for other evaluation studies. Although the circumstances of other evaluators may not be as favorable as ours, the experiences reported here suggest that involving program staff to whatever extent possible is likely to increase information use.

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